



**Dada/Surrealism**  
ISSN 0084-9537

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No. 12 *Visual Poetics*

pps. 81-89

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## Seeing the Snag: Optical Poetry and Beyond

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### Recommended Citation

Caws, Mary Ann. "Seeing the Snag: Optical Poetry and Beyond." *Dada/Surrealism* 12 (1983): 81-89.

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# Seeing the Snag: Optical Poetry and Beyond

Mary Ann Caws

Il m'est interdit de m'arrêter pour voir. Comme si j'étais  
condamné à voir en marchant.

Jacques Dupin

I want to project a state of things in which the present poetic complications become the lyricism of the future. What is advantageous about difficulty, as it now presents itself in reading, paradoxically, is simple: given a smooth or readable surface, the difficult patch will focus attention upon itself, enabling the glance to be slowed down, the mind to grab on to a particular detail, the participatory intelligence of the reader to function at its fullest. I have elsewhere investigated the problem in art, where it is often a question of "not losing the surface" when we are concerned with significance. (We might think here of Sartre's distinction between poetry and prose, the former being what we see the surface of, the latter being what we see through, rapidly, to its message.) The anxiety of this loss concerning a surface texture is anything but superficial.

To slow down the glance, optical poetry is particularly efficacious, as we know, impeding the linear rush from beginning to end, forcing attention to sides and center; the relation of the optical to the verbal creates its own problems and thus its own creative delay within the text, holding it up, and slowing it down for greater insight. A recent avatar of the concrete or optical poets, combining poetry and what might seem to be prose with typographical details, Lionel Ray plays coolly with and upon the picture and its insertion in the text. His own verbal pictures are interesting above all in the questions they raise: in the first figure (see Fig. 1), taken like the other texts from a volume centered on potentiality and called *La Parole possible* (The Possible Word),<sup>1</sup> the statement of identification of narrator and writing, at least in the past, is primordial: "j'étais un texte je volais je mourais mal paroles dans un voilage radieux noué autour des voix" (I was a text I was flying I was dying badly words in a radiant rigging knotted about the voices) (p. 108). This personalization of the text intertwines with a third-person description, "il cachait" (he was hiding), and the alternating persons provide an interior monologue couched in the lyric stream of consciousness in the past, signaled by the convergence of hyphenated word and single moment remembered: "j'écoutais ici le ciel fuyant l'herbe . . . tu étais mon ange-voyelle et le moment d'une fontaine au couchant des voix" (I was listening here to the sky fleeing the grass . . . you were my angel-vowel and the moment of a fountain at the setting of the voices) (pp. 108-9).

sa joue effleurait un ruban vert jusqu'à la nuit voici  
 la femme contre l'arbre à feu les lointains froids et  
 les lents instants : j'étais un texte je volais je mour  
 ais mal paroles dans un voil  
 age radieux noué aut our des  
 voix il cachait nuit la tris  
 tesse des bouches et rien ne  
 bougeait dans la mer dans l'  
 élan des lampes rien sur son  
 poil humide ses rose aux fad  
 eurs de lune et rive à fleurs  
 il n'eut femmes non dans un  
 tourbillon d'ardeurs comme de fécondes phrases mais de  
 bout sortant des solitudes avec des joies au vent lui  
 donnais ce don ce nom entre tous pendant neuf jours je  
 lui donnais des incendies on  
 vivait de cristal sur un col  
 de nuées d'émois d'abîme ses  
 yeux figeaient l'haléine des  
 éblouissements je la voulais  
 dans les oiseaux les estuaires les chiffres la langue  
 amère des serpents je la voulais jusqu'aux os dans les  
 croupes les fleuves l'anéantissement j'écoutais ici le  
 ciel fuyant l'herbe à sons  
 toit tu étais mon ange-voy  
 elle et le moment d'une fontaine au couchant des voix

parmi les CHAMPS DE  
 LA LIMITE — — — —  
 — — — — à des amis  
 variables — — — ces  
 paupières de mes em  
 pires — — — — —

cherchant la soif et  
 Nostalgie — — —  
 — — Dame des lacs

parmi les bonds

Within the inset rectangles of words, the interior monologue contains another, set still more deeply, and here the ellipses or gaps depict what is in fact missing on the level of reading. The fields contained in the first inset rectangle are those of limit and border, capitalized for their significant location on the very verge of limit itself. Here the variables suggest themselves as both intimate and changeable: "des amis variables" (variable friends); and over the fields a shutter is placed with the eyelids lowered, like a dark curtain of closure, where the gaps flower as they may. The enclosure is marked off from the rest of the text already by the rectangular frame, and still further, by the dark created within the inner vision as it retires from what is spelled out, ungapped, whole, and placed in daylight. If indeed "I was a text," then this text is what, in all likelihood, I was. And what we might well expect poetry to be.

The other inset rectangles respond to this, and continue the interior vision, full as they are of thirst for the past, nostalgia, and legend ("cherchant la soif et Nostalgie . . . Dame des lacs"). And pushing back toward the past, they project toward the future, for the Lady of this darkened Lake, like some surrealist Melusina, a woman-child over whom time has no sway, frequents not just the

de l'autre côté du mot  
*matinée* ils viennent a  
 vec le vent leur voisin  
 arqué dans l'éclair à  
 l'extrême froid sous l

tout parle ici — — —
— — — — — même
quatre — — — — —

es courbes dociles ils entrent dans la photo avec des  
 jardins ils rasant les phares les mains les fatigues  
 réveillent les roues déplacent les crépuscules ils po  
 seront leurs visages dans leurs lunettes et joindront  
 leurs rêves aux bouches des cailloux ils seront proch  
 es et tolérables comme la menthe comme la mort que j'  
 ai rencontrée hier sur un visage de merci écoutez-moi

— — — — — fables
en forme de sein : — —

j'ai vu des lettres  
 comme leurs mains,  
 des initiales comme  
 leurs poignets puis

j'ai vu des chats dans l'herbe agressive lécher leur  
 ombre il y avait du jaune dans leurs gestes mais à d'  
 autres étapes on reconnut les couloirs de la seconde  
 fois (ainsi le programme de nos  
 soirées) ils se sont assis en p  
 leine soif (le texte des blessu  
 res) ils disaient l'impossible  
 avec des arches dans les yeux du vert tous les déluges

LA NEIGE — — —
AU NOM DE NEIGE

Figure 1

dark liquid imagery of the unconscious but the convulsive beauty of the sur-  
 realist imagination always to come and always at its most intense, seen pictured  
 in another inset: "parmi les bonds." This leap forward, in time and space, re-  
 minds us of the famous "saccade" or jolt found at the end of *Nadja*, associated  
 with the train leaping and jerking in the station of Lyon, always only about to  
 leave and never leaving, the privileged image of the convulsive beauty Sur-  
 realism cherishes, leading to endlessly future fables, first in the form of a fabled  
 breast ("fables en forme de sein"), then of "SNOW - - - IN THE NAME OF SNOW."  
 ("LA NEIGE - - - AU NOM DE NEIGE"). The snows of yesterday have yielded  
 here to those of tomorrow: Mallarmé's white page will have produced this, in  
 the place of the black of print. (Again in the present, Jacques Garelli's poetic  
 title "N'ai-je ma raison?" points coldly along the same pale path.)

Across from a radiant candle-flame (p. 114, see Fig. 2), the windows framed  
 in a high rectangle toward the top of page 115 rest almost on their perpendicular  
 verbal support in the lower window-frame: "PALES: MOTS." About these  
 windows in the habitation of words a poetic world is constructed, literally,  
 within the surrounding text, where the patient linear construction goes on in

en gros caractères : vous savez, la maison à clefs l'  
 iris aux cheveux fourbes? plus loin un vieux chapeau  
 comme on en voit sur les ci catrices ou les hautes  
 grilles de peupliers ni c hauds ni froids des sal  
 ves de fruits morts à ch aque volet se fermaient  
 sur un jardin envahi de genoux à quoi corresp  
 ondent l'étiquette rou ge et les rivières en  
 deuil « nous allons gra nd train » dit-elle à  
 demi renversée alors l e corps malléable gr  
 andissait immense com c s me une parole inexp  
 lorée duvet lunaire jus I E te un charme l'on  
 descendait par cette l T R ongue nef à marée f  
 urtive dans l'odeur fr o é iable des herbes ma  
 rines dans l'eau des fl U s eurs atterries jusqu'à  
 la maison sous les voy T U elles aux hanches dou  
 loureuses aux lumières M tristes, puis en guise  
 d'écluse la tourbe du som E meil avant un nouveau  
 départ pour de longues ap prochées cueillaison des  
 simples élixir mon poison d'eau fraîche ma vivante é  
 criture fleuve indolent qui va de l'univers à l'univers

the center of the picture: "je maçonnais un monde ligne à ligne" (I was making as a mason a world line by line), the true and pictured justification of the builder who is at home in the world of words and in the state of poetry, defined at the base of the page: "homme de nul écart dans l'état de mots" (man without swerve in the state of words). His only diversion will be toward the future.

The questions posed by this pictured state of things in the poetic habitation are themselves part of the construction worked over by reader and text: the building of this difficult state of things, without swerve, requires if not answers, then at least meditation, upon the surface of things as it is framed off for our deliberate contemplation. What does it mean, in the case of these literal picture windows now reread ("fenêtres pâles les mots") to be able to see through words, which after all they are, as they are framed to be widow panes? For the pictures of the words as framing windows themselves play on the notion of seeing through or transparency, and that of meaning. We see through them even as they hold up our sight and our thought: this is a paradigm case of positive and creative difficulty, a maximal opening, supposing what will come to fill in the picture.

In the text of Jabès as illustrated by Tapiès<sup>2</sup> (see Fig. 3), the minimal art of the line and the two first numbers, just a one/two, sets up a rhythm of an utter sympathy. The text demands an ultimate birth within the nuances of the blinding

j'ouvrais aux portes un pays il n'est blé que de vents  
ce moment égaré des lèvres pour ralentir un arbre puis  
en lieu amer je voyais le souffle maniant les couleurs  
c'était avant le pas des fleurs écrasant leurs ombres  
inventer les espaces  
les mots labours bor  
orloge (Odéon 84-00)  
ornait le paysage pi  
emps brisait des mél  
es retour d'ombre re  
archais dans les obl  
elle de pages je maç  
gne à ligne (à la ga  
les enfants mâchonna  
corps apprivoisaient  
sexe inventait les illusions mais autre chose la jeune  
fille aux acacias tremblants elle a dit *oui* à des bouq  
uets maisons où il y a des lits laqués désordre où je  
cherchais mon nom  
ses bras d'où s'é  
mes consonnes la  
rideaux c'était fête homme du langage j'entrais dans l  
'eau d'un souffle c'était île, homme de nul écart dans  
l'état de mots de vols d'oiseaux irréductibles phrases

F  
E  
N  
Ê  
T  
R  
E  
S

PÂLES : MOTS

comme étoffe entre  
nages contrats d'h  
marchand de plumes  
geons partout le t  
ancolies des chain  
tour de vague je m  
iques rayons le tr  
onnais un monde li  
re il était midi)  
ient les syllabes  
la différence leur  
elle ouvrait  
c-hap-paient  
chambre aux

Figure 2

white, seen in succession as sound or murmur; as image, or the petals of an implicit flower (suggesting Mallarmé's absolute container of a vase defined as an "absence of all bouquets"); as the concept of a double departure and a double denial, scratching out or crossing off a name left unwritten. All these are taken as the range and degrees of white itself, in its oxymoronic oppositions leading from glacier and summit snow to the white-hot sheet burning with a name finally uttered behind the dazzling surface, uttered as the potential fill-in for the space set apart, the white heat of a leaf kept in reserve for its name.

But how does the numerical see-saw the artist sets up to accompany the text here work its visual and conceptual balance in relation to these words, or rather, how do we read it? Subsequent to the text, it nevertheless demands our attention, as if it were simultaneous. The line across the page, with its second number rising above the first, is not the sort of illustration that refers one back to the text for a clue about itself, but produces, rather, a delay in the reading mechanism working itself out. One might read it in this way: as one progresses, lifted to the next number, so the whole white text, like Mallarmé's white page, is made to rise to the next power above it, yet connected to the line of reading. The title of the facing page, entitled "V'herbe," suggests both the notion of grass and that of the Word. The entire text becomes, visually and verbally, "La mise en accusation de l'oeil," a prosecution of the eye or a verbal

## VII

Que tout soit blanc afin que tout soit naissance.

*(Blanc, le murmure.*

*Blanc, le pétale.*

*Blanc, le départ.*

*Blanche, la rature.)*

Tant de différences dans le blanc ! Blanc liquide,  
poudre blanche.

Combien de degrés dans le blanc ! Du blanc glacial des  
sommets au blanc chaud du feuillet gardé en réserve  
pour son nom.



Figure 3

trial of the seen-as-the-read exactly equivalent to what is taking place within the reading itself, rendered difficult by the simplest syntax of double vision, in a delay.

In many of the contemporary poets, the chosen difficulties can be seen to work in a net of relations or a sort of system of problems to hold in delay or reserve the reading of the text. For example, Michel Deguy is often concerned with the poetry of self-cancellation or of loss or of unfinishedness. ("I have already forgotten what is going to begin," ends one poem). Ironically, a text about the "rapprochants," or the bridges bringing elements together, ends with the quintessence of the unfinished: "To invent bridgings [rapprochants] . . . which bring nearer the" – and here, with no conclusion, the text simply ends.

The mind is brought to a halt with a jerk: precisely that which is to be brought nearer is absent, so that the near is typically the furthest off of all. These are exemplary snags, deliberate delays, purposely never integrated into a system.

It seems to me that of all contemporary poets, Jacques Dupin has had, for a long time now, a clearer and more meaningful sense of the system of his own difficulty, not chosen but sensed as inevitable. By all the myriad poetic techniques and summonings of the hard concept; by his almost obsessive use of the oxymoron; by his imagining of such quasi-impossible figures as "the only woman following me, and she does not follow me,"<sup>3</sup> and the wonderful ambivalence of such pictures as that of the cart wheel "bluer from being discolored" (p. 177); by his frequent ellipses, celebrations of fragmentation and rupture, of the jolts of language and vision, he succeeds in sharpening and intensifying the edge of his language. "L'intense écriture s'aiguise" (the intense writing makes its edge finer). Even a few lines from one of his early prose poems, "L'Ordre du jour" ("The Order of Day"), give the tone of the special kind of self-enclosed density he masters, displaying, even as the concept is closed off, a kind of high language joyfully impenetrable to paraphrase and self-exaltation: he has done for French poetry what Henry James does for the English-language novel, wreaking difficulty upon it and opening it to the future.

D'élire domicile au coeur de l'entr'acte, acquiescement et refus obligent qui les creuse. Par l'incorporation du hasard à la chair, j'incarne enfin la transe originelle, j'accueille la foudre du premier rapt. Je suis le moment d'oubli qui fonde la mémoire . . . Au haut crucial où s'abolit la danse, l'expiation commence et l'acte nul. Mais de l'opération qu'ils impliquent et renoncent, j'augure ironiquement d'un orgasme définitif.

De ce mal qui s'étire dans la longue saignée des siècles, je suis l'exacte et pure abstraction,

— le noeud d'asphyxie formelle.

Ignorez-moi passionnément! (p. 91)

To choose domicile in the heart of the intermission, acquiescence and refusal oblige those who hollow them out. By the incorporation of chance into the flesh, I finally incarnate the original trance, I welcome the lightning of the first seizure. I am the moment of oblivion that founds memory . . . At the crucial height where dance is abolished, expiation begins and the null act. But from the operation that they imply and renounce, I ironically augur a definitive orgasm.

Of this malady which stretches out in the long bleeding of centuries, I am the exact and pure abstraction,

— the knot of formal asphyxia.

Ignore me passionately!

The difficulty of this text and the others like it comes from the obvious depth at which the original is situated, and not from any surface complication or delay. The invitation to trance and lightning, to expiatory operation and ironic inauguration, are all knotted within the final oxymoron, "ignore me passionately," and allow it to be unfolded as delayed and projected.

My final example is from the opposite kind of poet, less apparently "hard" as he is more "simple." Lorand Gaspar, speaking often of the renewed experience of loss and insufficiency, is haunted by the desperate or anxious retention of whatever appears to matter: "To keep, to keep. Who will cure our hand as it



clenches tightly?"<sup>4</sup> Yet the human mind as it takes its own measure, for instance in self-reference against the sea, is constantly haunted by the realization of not being up to nature:

Il y a toujours un soir où tu t'arrêtes  
insuffisant devant la mer.<sup>5</sup>

There is always an evening when you stop  
in lack before the sea.

What now is the relation of the insufficiency experienced before nature and before death to that of the poem as it would help us retain?

The close of the volume called *Approche de la parole* deals with this, as best it can, and I read it also, as best I can. The surface here poses no question, for those come in this poetry from the depths of things. Here the writing itself, as it speaks of loss, speaks of what cannot be lost, kept within that very cup of the hand, as in a natural hollow:

L'écriture effacée, en ce creux qui t'attire, la haute tension d'une parole perdue. Elle était toutes les lignes du monde et tous ses manquements. Peut-être.

Mais tout poème est un poème perdu, l'obscurité d'une parole à jamais oubliée. (p. 144)

Writing wiped out, in this hollow attracting you, the high voltage of a lost word. It was all the lines of the world and all its lacks. Perhaps.

But every poem is a lost poem, the darkness of a word forever forgotten.

And yet, the clarity of light and sea, the "grande page du matin aux rives de pierres où le jour nous vient de l'aveugle citerne des yeux" (the great page of morning with the banks of stones where the day comes to us from the blind cistern of the eyes), where walking and breathing are questionless and speak of no returning, are these not too simple to attract a reading accustomed to the difficult?

Mais qui lira une si simple écriture?

Poète est plus sévère que silence.

...

Dire et se perdre: il reste sur le sol d'homme le visage limé dans le torrent absolu.

(p. 145)

But who will read such a simple writing?

Poet is severer than silence.

...

To speak and to lose oneself: there remains on the earth of man the face whittled out in the absolute torrent.

This is then the real difficulty of the contemporary poet of the simple, turned toward and anxious about the difficulties of the future, making his hard construction of what seems less hard, but may be more enduring. When the surface detail will no longer hold up the reading, when the gaps are sensed not in the verbal or visual text or in their correspondence, but in the insufficiency of the human experience and of human language itself before the sea or before silence, the difficulty is no longer just visible, audible, or conceptual, but perhaps of more matter: in the difficulty of living and seeing as of reading, and in reading that sight, hardest in what is most elemental. What the "man without

swerve in the state of words" works out in the language and the construction of the poem must be seen straight on, not snagged or gapped, or held up within itself, but measured only by what surrounds it and what it questions, which is about to be all of being, as we shall read it.

*Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY*

## NOTES

1. Lionel Ray, *La Métamorphose du biographe suivi de La Parole possible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). All translations in this article are mine.
2. Edmond Jabès, *Ça suit son cours* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), pp. 108-9.
3. Jacques Dupin, *Dehors* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 100.
4. Lorand Gaspar, *Approche de la parole*, p. 91.
5. Lorand Gaspar, *Egée suivi de Judée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 67.